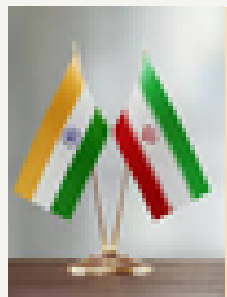


THE PALA CIVIL TIMES



Civil Service Institute | Pala | Thiruvananthapuram | South India's Premier Civil Service Coaching Institute | www.civilservicepala.org



Iran grants India, 4 others Hormuz passage

THE HINDU : 27-03-2026 : Page 1



Government revamps UDAN scheme with changes in subsidy

THE HINDU : 26-03-2026 : Page 1

Faiths and fences

THE HINDU editorial: 27-03-2026 : Page 8

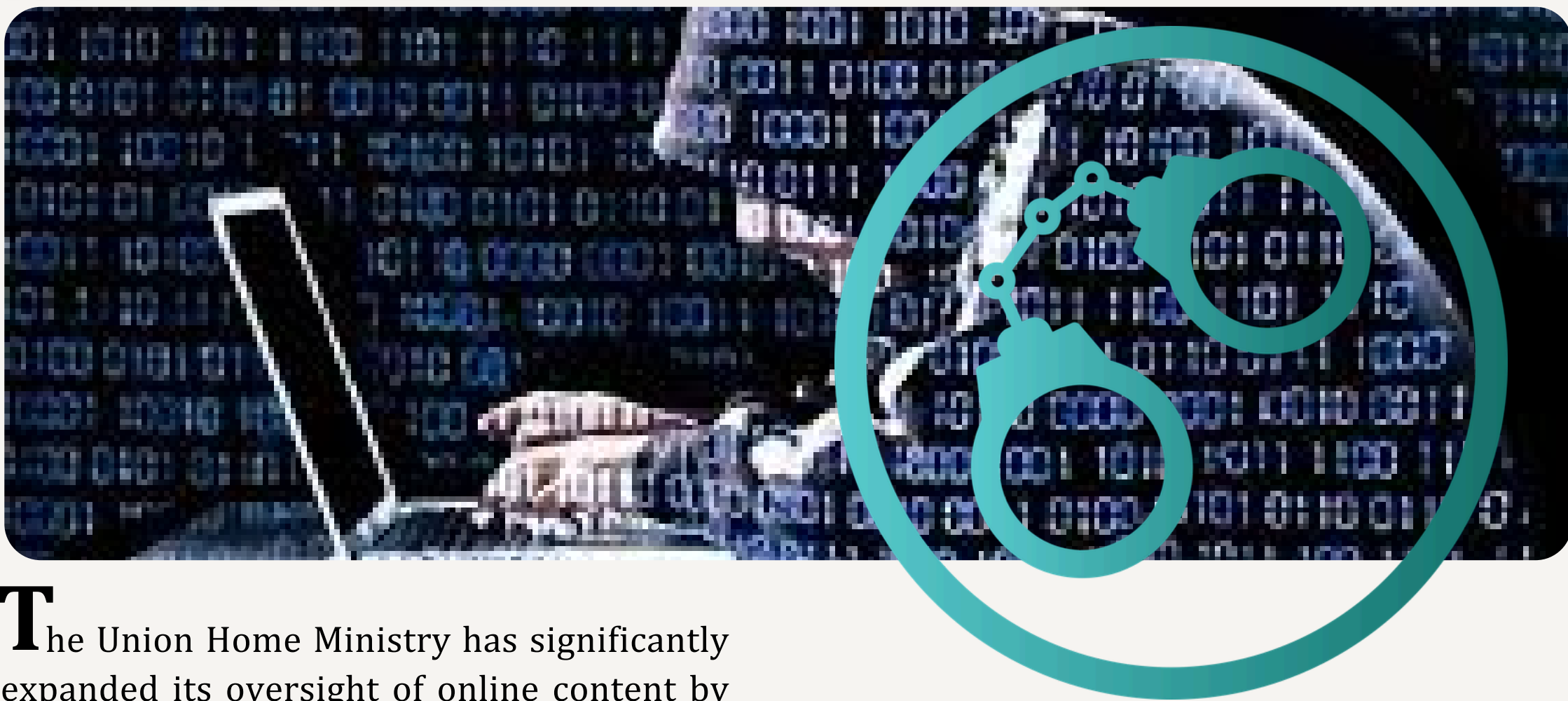


UPSC Spotlight - focus page for prelims 2026

The Pala Civil Times special feature



HOME MINISTRY SENDS 290 TAKEDOWN NOTICES A DAY



The Union Home Ministry has significantly expanded its oversight of online content by issuing a large number of takedown notices under Section 79(3)(b) of the Information Technology Act, 2000. Since March 2024, when the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) was authorised to act under this provision, the Ministry has issued an average of about 290 notices per day, leading to the blocking of over 1.11 lakh pieces of suspicious online content by March 2025. While online platforms are generally protected from liability for user-generated content under Section 79(1), this protection no longer applies if they fail to remove flagged content. Intermediaries are required to act within three hours of receiving such orders from authorities. The system has also been legally upheld, with the Karnataka High Court dismissing a challenge to both the provision and the Sahyog portal, which enables coordinated notice-sharing across agencies.

At the same time, India is witnessing a sharp rise in cybersecurity incidents, highlighting the growing digital risk environment. According to data from the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In), the country recorded 29.44 lakh cybersecurity incidents in 2025, a significant increase from 20.41 lakh in 2024, marking the highest level in the past five years. CERT-In, functioning under Section 70B of the IT Act, serves as the national agency for responding to cyber threats, with the highest number of reported incidents coming from Delhi. Together, these developments indicate a dual trend of increasing government intervention in regulating online spaces and a rising need to strengthen cybersecurity mechanisms in response to growing digital vulnerabilities.



Government revamps UDAN scheme with changes in subsidy

The Ude Desh ka Aam Nagrik (UDAN) scheme was launched in 2016 with the objective of making air travel affordable and improving connectivity to Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. It aimed to link underserved and unserved regions through subsidised air routes while also reviving unused airports. Over the years, the scheme has contributed to regional development by enhancing access to remote, hilly, and island areas.

Performance of the Original Scheme

Since its launch, the UDAN scheme has operationalised 663 routes across 95 airports, including heliports and water aerodromes. It has enabled over 3.41 lakh flights and transported more than 162 lakh passengers. The scheme has improved connectivity and supported sectors such as tourism, healthcare, and emergency services. However, concerns emerged regarding the long-term viability of routes. A report found that only about 7% to 10% of routes remained operational after the subsidy period ended. Additionally, out of the total routes launched, a significant number were discontinued, indicating structural and financial challenges in sustaining regional air services.

Need for Policy Revision

The limited sustainability of routes highlighted the need for reforms. Earlier, subsidies were provided for only three years, with the expectation that routes would become self-sufficient. These subsidies were funded through a levy on airfares on non-UDAN routes rather than direct government support. This model proved insufficient in ensuring long-term viability, prompting the government to revise the scheme.



Modified UDAN Scheme: Key Features

The government has approved a revised version of the UDAN scheme with a total outlay of ₹28,840 crore for the period from FY 2026-27 to FY 2035-36. The modified scheme introduces several structural changes to improve sustainability and expand connectivity. A major change is the extension of subsidy support for airlines from three years to five years for specific routes. Additionally, subsidies will now be funded directly by the government instead of being collected through airfare levies.

Financial Allocation and Components

₹10,043 crore is allocated for Viability Gap Funding (VGF) to support airlines over 10 years, ensuring route viability. Additionally, ₹12,159 crore is set aside to develop 100 airports from unserved airstrips, expanding regional connectivity.

Support for Airport Operations

Recognising the high operational costs and low revenue potential of regional airports, the scheme includes provisions for Operation and Maintenance (O&M) support for up to three years to address high costs and low revenues of regional airports, improving their sustainability.

Improving Last-Mile Connectivity

The scheme proposes developing 200 helipads in remote, hilly, and island regions to improve last-mile connectivity and support emergency and healthcare access.

Boost to Indigenous Aviation

The scheme promotes domestic manufacturing by including indigenous aircraft like HAL Dhruv and Dornier to strengthen operations in remote areas.

Expected Impact of the Revised Scheme

The modified UDAN scheme is expected to significantly enhance regional connectivity and support economic growth in smaller cities. It will facilitate trade, tourism, and investment in previously underserved areas. The scheme also aims to make air travel more affordable and accessible to the general public.

Faiths and fences

The Supreme Court of India recently reaffirmed an important principle in India's anti-discrimination framework regarding Scheduled Caste (SC) status. The issue arose from a case in Andhra Pradesh, where a Christian pastor sought protection under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. The Court upheld the earlier High Court ruling that individuals who convert out of specified religions are no longer eligible for SC status under the law.

Expansion of Similar Laws Across States

The judgment is based on the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 issued under Article 341 of the Constitution. This order defines which communities qualify as Scheduled Castes. According to this framework, SC status is limited to individuals practising Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism. Therefore, conversion to religions outside this list results in the loss of SC recognition and associated legal protections.

Historical Evolution of SC Definition

Initially, the SC category included only Hindus. Over time, it was expanded to include Sikhs in 1956 and Buddhists in 1990. This evolution reflects changing social and political realities. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru had earlier argued that untouchability was primarily linked to Hindu social structures, which shaped the original classification.

Role of Social Reform and Conversion

Religious conversion has historically been used as a means of social assertion by marginalized communities. A prominent example is B. R. Ambedkar, who led a mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956. Such movements reflected attempts to escape caste-based discrimination while also influencing later policy adjustments.

The question of extending SC status to converted individuals is still under examination by a commission headed by K. G. Balakrishnan. The Court emphasized that any change in this policy must come through legislative action rather than judicial interpretation. This highlights that the issue remains open for future political and legal deliberation.



Debate on Inclusion and Exclusion

The exclusion of converts to Islam and Christianity remains a debated issue. One argument is that these religions do not support caste-based discrimination in their theology. However, in practice, social discrimination often persists even after conversion. This creates a gap between legal definitions and ground realities, making the issue complex and contested.

Current Policy and Legal Position

At present, individuals from SC backgrounds who convert to Christianity or Islam are not eligible for SC benefits. Instead, they may receive support under provisions meant for socially and educationally backward classes under Article 15(4). The Court clarified that its decision aligns with the existing constitutional and legal framework.

Iran grants India, 4 others Hormuz passage

The ongoing conflict involving Iran, the United States, and Israel has significantly affected regional stability, particularly in key maritime zones. A major development has been Iran's assertion of control over the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman. Iran has stated that it allowed passage for ships from select "friendly nations," including India, despite a sharp decline in maritime traffic due to the conflict.

The situation escalated after an Iranian naval vessel was sunk in a U.S. attack near Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean. India and Sri Lanka assisted in securing other Iranian ships in the region, reflecting India's role as a stabilizing maritime actor. The number of ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz has drastically reduced, highlighting risks to global energy supply chains, as a significant portion of the world's oil passes through this route.



Strategic Importance of the Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints, with global implications for energy security and trade. Iran's claim of sovereignty over parts of the strait, along with its control over passage, underscores the geopolitical sensitivity of the region. Any disruption here directly impacts oil prices, shipping routes, and global economic stability.

For India, the Strait holds vital importance due to its dependence on energy imports from West Asia. Continued access, even during conflict, indicates the importance of diplomatic relations and strategic balancing in the region.



Shifts in Diplomatic Engagement

India's response has not been limited to maritime coordination but extends to active diplomacy. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited France to participate in the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting as a partner country. Discussions included the evolving situation in West Asia and the need to ensure the security of the Strait of Hormuz. India's participation reflects its growing role in global governance and its ability to engage with both Western and Global South groupings.

Global Concerns and Multilateral Discussions

The conflict in Iran has become a central issue in international forums like the G7, with concerns extending to energy markets, food security, and fertilizer supply chains. India highlighted these broader impacts, particularly on the Global South, emphasizing the interconnected nature of geopolitical crises. Additionally, India reiterated the need for reforms in global governance institutions such as the United Nations Security Council, signaling its aspiration for a more representative international order.

Wider Implications and Global Context

The developments highlight a complex interplay of conflict, maritime security, and diplomacy. India's approach reflects a balance between safeguarding its strategic interests—especially energy security—and contributing to global stability through diplomacy and multilateral engagement. The Strait of Hormuz remains central to this dynamic, acting as both a geopolitical flashpoint and a critical artery of global trade.

Prelims 2026 Most Probable High-Yield Topics

Conference of Parties 30

The Conference of the Parties (COP) refers to the annual meetings held under the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change**, a global treaty adopted in 1992 to address climate change. These conferences bring together countries in the world to assess progress and negotiate collective action against climate change. COPs serve as the primary global platform where governments decide on measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, adapt to climate impacts, and provide financial and technological support to developing countries. They also review global efforts toward limiting the global temperature rise to **1.5°C above pre-industrial levels**, in line with the objectives of the Paris Agreement.

COP 30

COP30 was held in Belém, Brazil from November 10 to 21, 2025. It marked the 30th session of the COP under the UNFCCC and was positioned as an **“implementation COP,”** focusing on translating existing climate commitments into actionable frameworks.

The conference brought together global leaders, negotiators, and stakeholders to strengthen international cooperation and accelerate climate action.

Outcomes

- A **Global Implementation Accelerator** was launched to fast-track climate actions such as renewable energy expansion, methane reduction, and nature-based solutions.
- A commitment was made to **triple adaptation finance by 2035**, aimed at supporting vulnerable countries.
- The **Belém Mechanism for Just Global Transition** was introduced to ensure equitable and inclusive transitions to sustainable economies.
- A **Technology Implementation Program (TIP)** was launched to enhance technology deployment in developing countries.
- A new **Gender and Climate Action Plan** was adopted to increase women’s participation in climate decision-making.
- A two-year work programme on climate finance was initiated to improve predictability of funding from developed to developing countries.
- The role of subnational actors (cities, states, municipalities) in climate action was formally recognized.

COP 30 Global Climate Action Agenda (GCAA)

- The Global Climate Action Agenda (GCAA) is a platform to mobilise non-state actors such as businesses, financial institutions, cities, and civil society for climate action.
- It builds on the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action.
- It supports implementation of:
 - **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)**
 - **National Adaptation Plans (NAPs)**
 - **National Biodiversity Strategies (NBSAPs)**

Six Thematic Axes

- (i) **transitioning energy, industry and transport;**
- (ii) **stewarding forests, oceans and biodiversity;**
- (iii) **transforming agriculture and food systems;**
- (iv) **building resilience for cities, infrastructure and water;**
- (v) **fostering human and social development;**
- (vi) **the final cross-cutting axis of unleashing enablers and accelerators, including finance, technology and capacity-building.**



Prelims 2026 Most Probable High-Yield Topics

Conference of Parties 30 - Energy Aspect

Under the thematic axis of energy, industry, and transport transition, the Global Climate Action Agenda at COP30 consolidated a range of voluntary initiatives and coalitions aimed at scaling up clean energy deployment, modernizing industrial processes, and shifting transport systems toward low-carbon technologies.

Belém 4x Pledge

The Belém 4x Pledge aims to quadruple the production and use of sustainable fuels globally by 2035 compared to 2024 levels.

- This initiative focuses on reducing dependence on fossil fuels, especially in sectors where direct electrification is difficult.
- It promotes the large-scale production and use of alternative fuels such as hydrogen, biofuels, and e-fuels.
- Hydrogen is seen as a clean fuel for industries like steel and fertilizers, while biofuels and e-fuels are important for transport sectors.
- The pledge encourages international cooperation and policy support to make these fuels affordable, accessible, and scalable.

Decarbonisation of Maritime Sector

The maritime sector is working towards decarbonisation through the development of green shipping corridors, which are specific trade routes using low-emission or zero-emission fuels.

- Shipping companies are increasingly adopting cleaner fuels such as green methanol and other alternative fuels to reduce emissions.
- There is a growing focus on building sustainable port infrastructure, including investments in clean energy systems and fuel supply chains.
- Around USD 1 billion in investment is being targeted to support green maritime infrastructure and transition efforts.
- These efforts aim to reduce the environmental impact of global shipping while maintaining efficiency in international trade.

Grid and Infrastructure Financing

Climate finance is focused on strengthening energy infrastructure, especially electricity grids - essential for integrating renewable energy.

A global coalition of utilities has committed to investing approximately USD 1 trillion by 2030 to support clean energy expansion.

- Out of this, around USD 66 billion per year is allocated to renewable energy generation, while USD 82 billion per year is dedicated to grids and energy storage systems.
- Major multilateral financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank are actively supporting grid expansion and modernization projects.
- Investment priorities include:
 - Modernizing grid infrastructure to handle increased renewable energy supply
 - Digitalization of grids for better efficiency and real-time management
 - Integration of renewable energy sources into existing power systems

Decarbonisation of Aviation Sector

The aviation sector has adopted a long-term goal of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

- As an intermediate step, countries and stakeholders aim to reduce carbon emissions from international aviation by **5% by 2030**.
- The sector is focusing on the use of Sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAF) as a key solution to reduce emissions in the near term.
- SAF is currently expensive and limited in supply, which remains a major challenge for widespread adoption.

Prelims 2026 Most Probable High-Yield Topics

Prelims model questions

Q. Consider the following initiatives launched at COP30:

1. Global Implementation Accelerator
2. Technology Implementation Program (TIP)
3. Belém Mechanism for Just Global Transition

Which of the above aim(s) at improving implementation of climate action?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1, 2 and 3
- (d) 1 only

Answer: (c)

Q. Which of the following best describes the term “Implementation COP” in the context of COP30?

- (a) A conference focused on setting new climate targets
- (b) A conference focused on translating existing commitments into actionable frameworks
- (c) A conference focused only on climate finance negotiations
- (d) A conference limited to developed countries

Answer: (b)

Q. Which of the following is NOT one of the thematic axes of the Global Climate Action Agenda?

- (a) Agriculture and food systems
- (b) Human and social development
- (c) Defence and national security
- (d) Cities, infrastructure and water resilience

Answer: (c)

Prelims model questions

Q. With reference to the Conference of the Parties (COP), consider the following statements:

COP is an annual meeting held under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

COP meetings are primarily focused only on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

COP reviews global efforts to limit temperature rise to 1.5°C under the Paris Agreement.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 3 only
- (b) 1 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (a)

Q. Consider the following statements regarding the Belém 4x Pledge:

1. It aims to quadruple the use of sustainable fuels by 2035.
2. It focuses on sectors where electrification is difficult.
3. It promotes fossil fuel expansion for energy security.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (a)

PRELIMS CORNER :

1) In the context of wearable technology, which of the following tasks is/are accomplished by wearable devices? (2019)

1. Location identification of a person
2. Sleep monitoring of a person
3. Assisting the hearing impaired person

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- a) 1 only
- b) 2 and 3 only
- c) 3 only
- d) 1, 2 and 3

2) Consider the following countries.

1. Australia
2. Canada
3. China
4. India
5. Japan
6. USA

Which of the above are among the 'freetrade partners' of ASEAN?

- a) 1,2,4
- b) 3, 4, 5, and 6
- c) 1, 3, 4 and 5
- d) 2, 3, 4 and 6

POLICY IN ACTION

Implementation Gap in India's Single-Use Plastic Ban

The field study conducted by Toxics Link reveals a classic gap between policy intent and ground-level implementation in India's ban on single-use plastics. Despite the nationwide prohibition introduced three years ago, about 84% of surveyed locations across cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bhubaneswar, and Guwahati continue to use banned plastic items. This highlights that policy success depends not just on legislation but on enforcement capacity, market behaviour, and public compliance. The persistence of plastic use is driven by multiple structural factors. Small vendors, especially in informal markets, continue to rely on single-use plastics due to their low cost and high customer demand, while alternatives such as paper or cloth bags remain relatively expensive. Consumer behaviour further reinforces this trend, as many still expect free carry bags and perceive disposable plastics as more hygienic. In contrast, organised retail sectors show better compliance, indicating that enforcement and accountability mechanisms are stronger in formal settings. The study also points to inconsistent monitoring and weak regulatory coordination, which reduce the deterrent effect of penalties. This demonstrates that policy implementation is not merely a legal exercise but a socio-economic challenge involving incentives, awareness, and supply chains. Without addressing affordability of alternatives, strengthening inspections, and aligning consumer behaviour with environmental goals, the ban risks remaining symbolic. Thus, the case reflects a broader governance lesson: effective policy outcomes require sustained institutional capacity, behavioural change, and market alignment, rather than one-time regulatory interventions.

**PRELIMS 2026
COUNTDOWN**

58 DAYS TO GO

Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) The correct answer is (c) 1, 3, 4 and 5 — Australia, China, India, and Japan, which are all free trade partners of Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

ASEAN has established a network of FTAs with key “Dialogue Partners” to promote regional economic integration. Specifically, ASEAN has five FTAs covering six partners: China, Japan, India, the Republic of Korea, and a combined agreement with Australia and New Zealand. From the given options, Australia (1), China (3), India (4), and Japan (5) are part of this framework. Canada and the USA are not part of ASEAN’s FTA network.

Understanding this requires a broader awareness of ASEAN’s role. Established in 1967 through the Bangkok Declaration, ASEAN initially consisted of five countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—and has since expanded to include ten (now eleven with Timor-Leste in 2025). Its primary aim is to promote economic growth, political cooperation, and regional stability in Southeast Asia.

FTAs are central to ASEAN’s external economic strategy. By partnering with major Asian economies like China, Japan, and India, as well as developed economies like Australia and New Zealand, ASEAN integrates itself into global supply chains and strengthens trade flows. These agreements also complement broader frameworks like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).



2) The correct answer is (d) 1, 2 and 3, as all the listed functions are performed by wearable technology.

Wearable technology refers to smart electronic devices that can be worn on the body as accessories or implants. Common examples include smartwatches, fitness bands, and advanced hearing aids. These devices are integrated with sensors, connectivity features, and software that enable them to perform a wide range of real-time monitoring and assistance functions.

First, location identification of a person is a key feature of many wearable devices. Smartwatches and fitness trackers often come with built-in GPS systems that allow users to track their location during activities like running, cycling, or traveling. This feature is also useful for safety purposes, such as tracking children, elderly individuals, or emergency situations.

Second, sleep monitoring is another important function. Wearable devices use sensors to track physiological parameters such as heart rate, body movement, and breathing patterns during sleep. Based on this data, they provide insights into sleep duration, sleep quality, and disturbances. This helps users improve their lifestyle and can also assist in identifying sleep-related disorders.

Third, wearable technology plays a significant role in assisting hearing-impaired individuals. Modern hearing aids are highly advanced wearable devices that amplify sound, reduce background noise, and enhance speech clarity. Many are also connected to smartphones via Bluetooth, allowing users to control settings and receive audio directly.

Overall, wearable devices combine health monitoring, navigation, and assistive technologies into compact, user-friendly tools. Their multifunctional nature makes them increasingly important in healthcare, fitness, and accessibility domains.